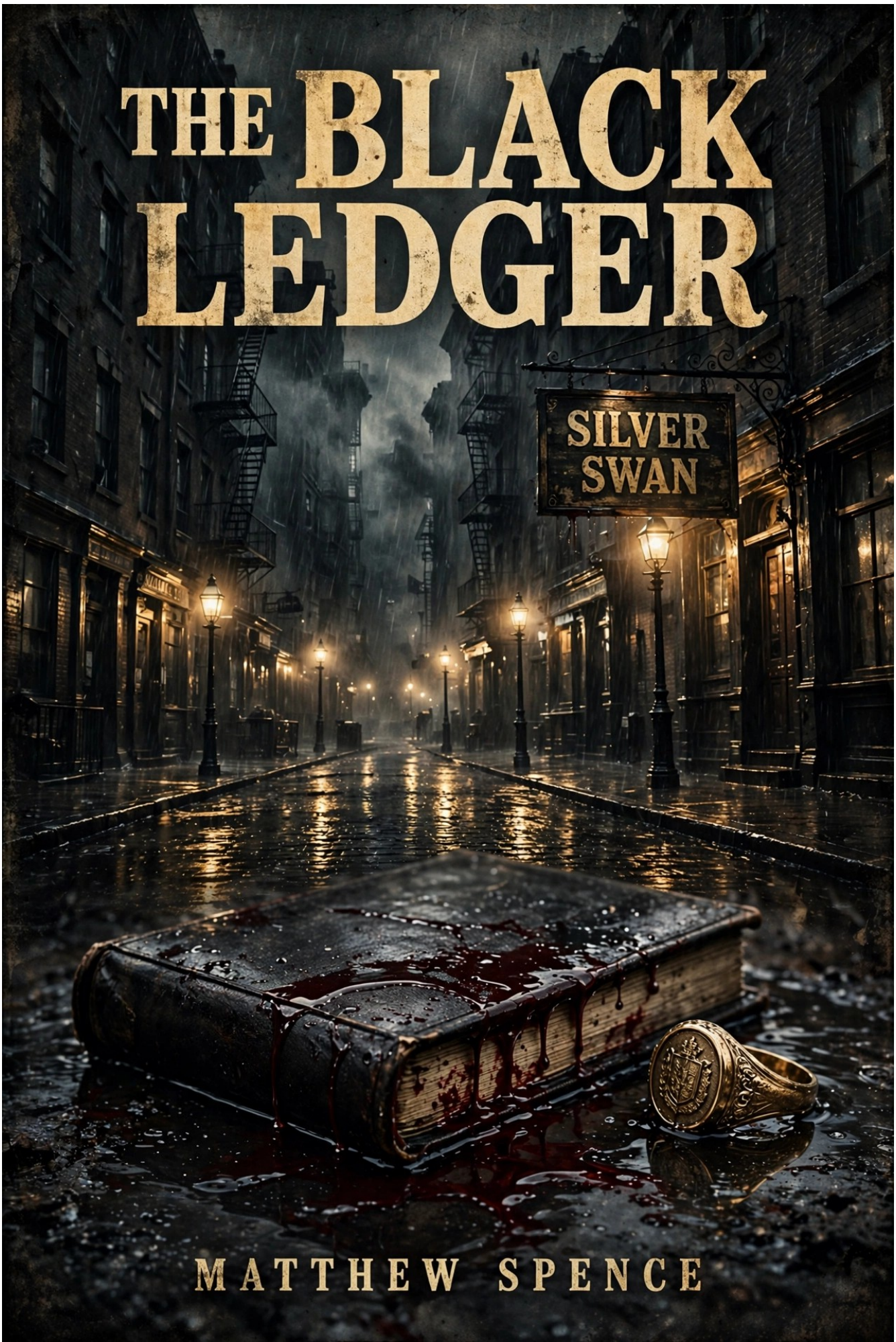
THE BLACK LEDGER
SILVER SWAN
MATTHEW SPENCE

THE BLACK LEDGER

By

Matthew Spence

1. Oh! the night that I struck New York,
I went out for a quiet walk;
Folks who are 'on to' the city say,
Better by far that I took Broadway;
But I was out to enjoy the sights,
There was the Bow'ry ablaze with lights;
I had one of the devil's own nights!
I'll never go there anymore!

Chorus:
The Bow'ry, the Bow'ry!
They say such things,
And they do strange things
On the Bow'ry! The Bow'ry!
I'll never go there anymore!

“The Bowery” by Percy Gaunt and Charles H. Hoyt, 1891

Chapter One

The Man in the Cellar

New York City had a thousand ways of making a man disappear.

In the respectable quarters of Manhattan, a disappearance might be accomplished with a forged signature, a locked drawing-room door, or a carriage waiting discreetly at midnight. In the Bowery, it required less ingenuity. A man could vanish between one gin palace and the next, swallowed by the press of sailors, thieves, peddlers, drunkards, newsboys, prostitutes, and respectable gentlemen who preferred not to be recognized after dark.

On the twenty-third of November, 1893, a cold rain came down over the city and turned the Bowery into a black ribbon of mud and reflected gaslight.

Samuel Bell knew something was wrong before he reached the cellar.

He had been working in the kitchen of the Silver Swan Saloon for eleven years, and in that time he had learned to distinguish between the ordinary noises of the building and the sounds that meant trouble. Bottles breaking upstairs meant a drunken quarrel. Heavy footsteps meant a customer being thrown into the street. Silence usually meant that somebody had done something worth keeping quiet.

The silence below the kitchen was absolute.

Bell stood at the bottom of the narrow stairs with one hand against the damp brick wall.

"Mr. Dwyer?"

Nothing.

He looked back toward the kitchen.

The cook, Mrs. O'Rourke, was shouting at one of the waiters about a tray of glasses. Above them came the usual roar of the saloon: laughter, piano music, the clink of bottles, and the occasional hoarse cheer from men who had been drinking since noon.

Bell swallowed.

Then he heard it.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

He raised the lantern.

A dark liquid was running beneath the door of the wine cellar.

Bell stared at it for several seconds before understanding what he was seeing.

"Sweet Jesus."

He opened the door.

The lantern flame trembled in his hand.

A man lay on the floor between two rows of wine casks.

He was dressed too well for the Bowery.

His black frock coat was soaked through at the shoulder, his white shirt stained almost entirely red. One hand was curled beneath him. The other rested beside his head, fingers still wearing a gold signet ring.

His throat had been cut.

Bell dropped the lantern.

The flame went out.

For several seconds he remained in darkness with the dead man.

Then he ran.

By the time the police arrived, the rain had become sleet.

Detective Inspector Thomas Avery of the New York Police Department stepped from a hansom cab beneath the striped awning of the Silver Swan and looked up at the building.

It was three stories of soot-blackened brick squeezed between a pawnbroker and a tobacco warehouse. Its windows glowed yellow against the wet darkness. A painted sign swung above the entrance:

SILVER SWAN
FINE ALES — WINES — SPIRITS

Avery disliked saloons.

He disliked their owners, their customers, their back rooms, and particularly the respectable men who entered them after midnight and then insisted the following morning that they had never been there.

He adjusted the collar of his overcoat.

"Who found him?"

"Kitchen boy," said Sergeant Malloy.

"Name?"

"Samuel Bell."

"Drunk?"

"Not when he found the body."

Avery gave him a look.

Malloy shrugged. "Can't say about before."

They entered.

Heat, smoke, and noise struck Avery all at once.

The Silver Swan was crowded despite the weather. Men in wool coats leaned over tables. Sailors drank beside shopkeepers. A group of young clerks were laughing too loudly near the piano. At the bar, several patrons watched the police with the particular fascination of people who hoped something dreadful might happen so long as it happened to somebody else.

Behind the counter stood the proprietor, Patrick Dwyer.

Dwyer was a broad man with a red face and enormous gray mustache. His waistcoat strained over his stomach.

"Inspector," he said.

Avery removed his gloves.

"Mr. Dwyer."

"I swear to you, I know nothing about this."

"You haven't been asked a question."

"I know what you're going to ask."

"Do you?"

"Who the gentleman was. Who killed him. Whether I saw anything."

"Did you?"

Dwyer opened his mouth.

Closed it.

Avery smiled without amusement.

"That's what I thought."

He handed his hat to Malloy.

"Clear the cellar."

"Already done."

"And the patrons?"

"Not yet."

"Keep them here."

Dwyer's face changed.

"You can't hold my customers."

"I can hold them until I know which one of them is a murderer."

That quieted the room.

Avery turned toward the stairs.

"Who owns the building?"

Dwyer hesitated.

"Mr. Isaac Rosen."

"Where is he?"

"I don't know."

"That's unfortunate."

Avery descended into the cellar.

The dead man was still where Bell had found him.

Avery crouched beside the body.

He was perhaps forty years old. Clean-shaven. His clothes were expensive, though not ostentatious. His boots were polished. His linen was of excellent quality.

No wallet.

No watch.

No identification.

Avery examined the man's hands.

Soft hands.

No calluses.

A gentleman.

But something about the body bothered him.

He leaned closer.

There was blood on the collar, blood on the shirt, blood across the floor.

Yet the man's coat was almost perfectly dry.

Avery frowned.

"How long has he been dead?"

The voice came from behind him.

Avery turned.

A young woman stood in the doorway.

She was perhaps twenty-five. Her dark hair was tucked beneath a plain hat, and she wore a man's wool overcoat several sizes too large for her. She carried a small leather medical bag.

Malloy stepped toward her.

"You can't come in here."

"I can if I'm the physician."

"You're a woman."

"So I am."

Malloy looked at Avery.

Avery looked at the woman.

"Doctor?"

"Elizabeth Mercer."

"You're the coroner?"

"No."

"Then why are you here?"

She looked at the body.

"Because the man is not dead."

For the first time that evening, Avery felt the cold.

He turned back toward the corpse.

The dead man's chest was still.

His face was gray.

There was a wound across his throat deep enough to kill any ordinary man.

"You're certain?"

Dr. Mercer knelt beside the body.

She placed two fingers against the man's neck.

Waited.

Then she looked up.

"No."

Avery's eyes narrowed.

"No?"

"I said he isn't dead."

Before Avery could answer, the man's fingers moved.

Once.

Twice.

Then the corpse opened its eyes.

The sound that escaped Malloy was very nearly a prayer.

The man's eyes fixed upon Avery.

His lips moved.

Avery leaned closer.

"What did he say?"

Dr. Mercer bent down.

The dying man struggled to breathe.

"Don't..." he whispered.

Avery listened.

"Don't what?"

The man's eyes shifted toward the cellar door.

Then toward the ceiling.

He gripped Avery's sleeve with surprising strength.

"Tell..."

His voice failed.

Avery waited.

"Tell them..."

The man's fingers tightened.

"...the Black Ledger..."

Then he died.

This time there was no doubt.

Dr. Mercer sat back on her heels.

Avery stared at the dead man's face.

"The Black Ledger," he repeated.

"Do you know what it means?" she asked.

"No."

"But somebody upstairs might."

Avery rose.

He looked toward the stairs.

Above them, the Silver Swan had become very quiet.

Every man in the saloon was listening.

Avery suddenly understood that the murder in the cellar was not an isolated act of violence.

Someone had brought a dying man into the Bowery.

Someone had taken his identification.

Someone had left him beneath a crowded saloon.

And someone, Avery suspected, had expected him to die before he could speak.

He turned to Sergeant Malloy.

"Lock the doors."

Malloy blinked.

"All of them?"

"Every one."

"And the people upstairs?"

Avery looked toward the ceiling.

"Nobody leaves."

Outside, the Bowery continued to roar beneath the rain.

The city moved around the Silver Swan as it always did.

Carriages rattled over wet cobblestones. Elevated trains screamed above the rooftops. Newsboys shouted beneath the lamps. Somewhere in the darkness, a bell struck midnight.

And beneath the noise of New York, the first secret of the Black Ledger waited to be uncovered.

Chapter Two

The Black Ledger

At twelve minutes past midnight, Inspector Thomas Avery discovered that a room full of frightened men was considerably more dangerous than a room full of drunken ones.

The Silver Swan had been cleared of everyone except the proprietor, the employees, and the customers who had been present when the body was discovered. They stood in uneasy clusters beneath the gas lamps, watching one another with the suspicion that comes naturally to men who have suddenly been informed that a murderer is among them.

Avery stood at the center of the saloon.

"Nobody leaves," he said again.

A sailor near the bar muttered something under his breath.

Avery turned.

"Did you say something?"

"No, Inspector."

"Good."

The sailor looked away.

Avery had spent fifteen years in the police service. He had learned that innocent men generally wanted to talk to policemen. Guilty men wanted to know what the policeman already knew.

Patrick Dwyer belonged unmistakably to the second category.

Avery approached the proprietor.

"Who was the dead man?"

"I told you, Inspector. I don't know."

"You knew him well enough to let him into your cellar."

"I didn't let him into my cellar."

"Then who did?"

Dwyer wiped his forehead.

"I don't know."

Avery stared at him.

"You are having a remarkable evening, Mr. Dwyer. You don't know who your customer was, you don't know who brought him downstairs, and you don't know why a dying man was found underneath your establishment."

Dwyer's face reddened.

"I run a respectable business."

Avery glanced around the room.

"That is a matter for another investigation."

A few customers laughed nervously.

Dwyer did not.

"Sergeant Malloy," Avery said, "take Mr. Dwyer into the office."

Dwyer stiffened.

"Inspector—"

"Now."

Malloy took him by the arm.

Avery turned toward Dr. Mercer.

She was standing near the stairs, examining the bloodstained medical instruments she had used on the victim.

"You've caused me some trouble, Doctor."

"I saved you from declaring a living man dead."

"You did."

"And now?"

"Now I have a dead man with no name, a room full of suspects, and a proprietor who lies badly."

She smiled faintly.

"Then we're having much the same evening."

Avery studied her.

"You heard what he said."

"The Black Ledger?"

"Yes."

"Do you know what it is?"

"No."

"Then why are you interested?"

"I dislike mysteries."

"That seems an odd objection for a detective."

"I am not a detective."

"You are now."

He walked past her.

She followed.

"Where are you going?"

"To examine the cellar again."

"Then I'll come with you."

Avery stopped.

"Doctor—"

"Elizabeth."

"Elizabeth. The cellar is a crime scene."

"I noticed."

"And you are not a police officer."

"No."

"Then perhaps you should remain upstairs."

She looked at him with such calm amusement that Avery found himself irritated.

"Inspector," she said, "you have a dead man downstairs who spoke after having his throat cut. I am the only person in this building who can tell you why he was able to do it. If you wish to solve your mystery, I suggest you let me work."

Avery considered her.

"Very well."

They descended.

The cellar smelled of damp stone, wine, coal smoke, and blood.

Avery held the lantern higher.

The body lay where they had left it.

Dr. Mercer crouched beside it.

"The wound is peculiar," she said.

"Peculiar?"

"The cut is deep, but it is not as clean as I first thought."

Avery knelt.

"Meaning?"

"Meaning the weapon was probably not a razor."

She touched the edge of the wound without disturbing it.

"It was jagged."

"A knife?"

"Perhaps."

She pointed toward the collar.

"There are fibers caught in the wound."

Avery examined them.

"Black cloth."

"Yes."

"Could be his own coat."

"No."

"Why?"

"Because this isn't wool."

She held up the tiny fragment.

"It is silk."

Avery looked at the dead man's coat.

"Someone strangled him first."

Dr. Mercer nodded.

"Perhaps."

Avery stood.

"Search the cellar."

They examined the floor, the wine racks, the walls, and the narrow passage leading toward the rear entrance.

Nothing.

Then Avery noticed a cask that had been moved recently.

He placed his hand against it.

"Dust."

"What?"

He pointed.

Every other cask had a gray film of dust.

This one did not.

Together they pushed it aside.

Behind it was a small wooden door.

Avery stared.

Dwyer had said nothing about a second room.

The door was locked.

Avery drew his revolver.

"Stand back."

He fired once.

The lock shattered.

The door opened inward.

The room beyond was barely six feet square.

There was no furniture.

No window.

Only shelves.

And on those shelves were ledgers.

Dozens of them.

Avery entered slowly.

"Good Lord."

Dr. Mercer followed.

The books were bound in black leather.

Each carried a year in faded gold lettering.

1879.

Avery reached for one.

"Don't."

He looked at her.

"Why?"

"Because if those are what I think they are, we ought to know who touched them before we do."

Avery lowered his hand.

"What do you think they are?"

"Records."

"Of what?"

"I don't know."

He looked at the shelves again.

"Then we have found the Black Ledger."

"No," said Dr. Mercer.

She pointed toward the back.

"That's only one of them."

Avery followed her gaze.

A single black book sat apart from the others.

It was newer.

Its cover was nearly unmarked.

There was no year on the spine.

Avery reached for it.

This time Dr. Mercer did not stop him.

He opened the cover.

The first page contained a list of names.

Some were unfamiliar.

Others were not.

Avery's eyes moved down the page.

He stopped.

"What's wrong?"

He pointed.

The name near the center of the page was unmistakable.

THOMAS AVERY.

Beneath it was a date.

November 23, 1893.

Tonight.

Avery stared at his own name.

For several seconds neither he nor Dr. Mercer spoke.

Then she whispered, "Inspector..."

Avery turned the page.

There was another name.

Elizabeth Mercer.

Beneath it was the same date.

November 23, 1893.

Avery slowly closed the book.

Neither of them heard the cellar door open.

Neither heard the footsteps behind them.

The first warning came when the lantern went out.

Then someone struck Avery across the back of the head.

He fell against the shelves.

Dr. Mercer screamed.

A second blow struck the wall beside her.

The black ledger fell to the floor.

And from somewhere in the darkness came a man's voice.

"You were never meant to find that book."

Then the cellar door slammed shut.

Chapter Three

The Man in the Dark

For several seconds after the door slammed, there was nothing but darkness.

Inspector Thomas Avery lay on the cellar floor, conscious but unable to move.

A dull pain pulsed through the back of his skull. He could smell dust, spilled wine, and something sharper beneath them all—the unmistakable metallic odor of blood.

His own blood, he supposed.

He heard Dr. Mercer breathing somewhere nearby.

"Doctor?"

"I'm here."

Her voice was steady.

"Are you hurt?"

"No."

Avery tried to sit up.

Pain exploded behind his eyes.

He stopped.

"Don't move," Elizabeth Mercer whispered.

"I'm a policeman. Moving is generally expected of me."

"You're also bleeding."

He touched the back of his head.

His fingers came away wet.

"How bad?"

"Bad enough that I wouldn't recommend standing."

"That's unfortunate."

There was a pause.

Then Avery heard something.

A faint scraping sound.

He became still.

"Doctor."

"I hear it."

The sound came again.

Scrape.

Scrape.

From behind the wine racks.

Someone was still in the cellar.

Avery slowly reached for his revolver.

His hand found nothing.

He remembered.

The attacker had knocked it from his belt.

Elizabeth whispered, "What are you doing?"

"Finding a weapon."

"With what?"

Avery felt along the floor.

His fingers touched something cold and cylindrical.

A bottle.

He gripped it.

"That will do."

The scraping stopped.

Silence returned.

Avery waited.

Then a shadow moved across the faint light beneath the cellar door.

Someone was standing outside.

The door opened.

A thin beam of light entered the cellar.

A man stood in the doorway.

He wore a long black coat and a dark felt hat pulled low over his face.

For an instant Avery could see only his silhouette.

Then the man stepped inside.

Elizabeth moved behind Avery.

The stranger raised something in his hand.

Avery threw the bottle.

It struck the man's wrist.

The weapon clattered across the floor.

Avery lunged.

The two men collided.

They crashed against the shelves, sending several bottles rolling onto the floor.

The stranger was stronger than Avery expected.

He struck Avery in the ribs.

Avery staggered.

Elizabeth grabbed the man's coat.

He turned and shoved her aside.

She struck the wall.

Avery saw his opportunity.

He drove his shoulder into the man's chest.

They fell together.

The stranger twisted free.

For one brief moment his face was illuminated by the light from the open door.

Avery saw him.

Young.

Perhaps thirty.

A narrow face.

A scar running from the left temple to the jaw.

And eyes that were almost unnaturally pale.

Then the man ran.

Avery scrambled after him.

By the time he reached the stairs, the stranger was gone.

The cellar door swung open.

Avery climbed into the kitchen.

"Stop!"

The cook screamed.

Several policemen turned.

Nobody had seen the stranger.

Avery rushed toward the rear entrance.

It was open.

Cold rain blew through the doorway.

He stepped outside.

The alley was empty.

Only a trail of footprints remained in the mud.

Avery stared after them.

Then Elizabeth came running behind him.

"He's gone."

Avery nodded.

"Yes."

"You saw his face?"

"Enough."

"Who was he?"

"I don't know."

She looked toward the alley.

"Then we're back where we started."

"No."

Avery looked at her.

"We're considerably worse off."

He returned to the cellar.

The black ledger was gone.

Avery stopped in the doorway.

The book had been lying beside the shelves.

Now it had disappeared.

Elizabeth saw his expression.

"He took it."

"Yes."

"But why?"

Avery crouched beside the dead man.

"Because it frightened him."

"You think the book contains his name?"

"I think the book contains something he doesn't want us to read."

Elizabeth looked at the body.

"What about the dead man?"

Avery examined him again.

The corpse had not moved.

The gold signet ring was still on his finger.

Elizabeth noticed something.

"Inspector."

She pointed toward the man's hand.

Avery leaned closer.

There was a small piece of paper clenched between the dead man's fingers.

He carefully removed it.

It was damp with blood.

Only three words were written upon it.

MERCER. PIER SIX.

Elizabeth stared at the message.

Avery looked at her.

"You know what it means."

She hesitated.

"No."

"Doctor."

"I know the place."

"Pier Six?"

"Yes."

"What is there?"

She looked away.

"Nothing."

Avery almost smiled.

"That answer usually means something."

Elizabeth folded her arms.

"Pier Six is where my father disappeared."

The cellar seemed to grow colder.

"When?"

"Seven years ago."

"What happened?"

"He was a physician."

"So?"

"He was investigating something."

"What?"

Elizabeth looked at the shelves.

"The same thing this man was investigating."

Avery waited.

She took a breath.

"My father believed that several respectable businessmen in New York were involved in the disappearance of poor men from the Bowery."

"Disappearance?"

"Men who had no families. No money. No one to complain when they vanished."

Avery's expression hardened.

"How many?"

"We don't know."

"Your father did?"

"He kept records."

"Where are they?"

She looked toward the empty space where the black ledger had been.

"Perhaps in that book."

Avery stood.

"Then we go to Pier Six."

"Tonight?"

"Immediately."

"You've been struck in the head."

"I've noticed."

"You may have a concussion."

"I may."

"You should see a doctor."

He looked at her.

"I have one."

Despite herself, Elizabeth smiled.

It was the first moment that either of them had smiled since the body was discovered.

Then footsteps sounded above them.

Avery's expression changed.

He raised a hand.

"Someone's coming."

They listened.

One set of footsteps.

Slow.

Measured.

Descending the stairs.

Avery reached for his revolver and remembered that he had lost it.

Elizabeth picked up the broken bottle.

The footsteps stopped.

A man's voice came from the darkness above.

"Inspector Avery?"

Avery stepped forward.

"Who are you?"

The man appeared at the top of the stairs.

He wore a dark police uniform.

Avery recognized him.

Officer Daniel Walsh.

One of the patrolmen assigned to guard the front entrance.

Walsh descended two steps.

"Inspector, there's been another murder."

Avery's stomach tightened.

"Where?"

Walsh looked at Elizabeth.

Then back at Avery.

"Upstairs."

"Who?"

"The bartender."

Avery stared at him.

"How?"

"His throat was cut."

Elizabeth whispered, "But why?"

Walsh's face had gone pale.

"Because he was carrying this."

He held up a small black envelope.

Avery approached.

"What is it?"

Walsh handed it to him.

On the front, written in red ink, were four words:

FOR INSPECTOR THOMAS AVERY

Avery opened it.

Inside was a single sheet of paper.

He unfolded it.

There was only one sentence.

You have until dawn to discover who killed the man in the cellar—or the next name in the ledger will be yours.

Avery read it twice.

Then he looked toward the cellar door.

Elizabeth was watching him.

"Who is the next name?" she asked.

Avery folded the paper.

"I don't know."

But even as he said it, he remembered the page.

His name.

Elizabeth's name.

And beneath them, one final entry he had noticed only for an instant before the attack.

A name he had recognized.

A name that belonged to a man who had been dead for seven years.

Her father.

Dr. Jonathan Mercer.

Avery looked at Elizabeth.

She understood immediately.

"My father," she said.

Neither spoke.

Above them, the clock in the saloon began to strike one.

One.

Two.

Three.

The sound continued through the building.

And somewhere in New York, hidden beyond the rain and gaslight, a man who had supposedly been dead since 1886 was waiting for them at Pier Six.

Chapter Four

Pier Six

The rain had stopped by the time they reached the East River.

New York was never silent, even at two o'clock in the morning. Somewhere behind them, wheels rattled over cobblestones. A ferry whistle sounded across the water. From the elevated railway came the metallic shriek of a train passing through the darkness.

But along the waterfront there was a different kind of quiet.

The warehouses stood like enormous black tombs.

Their brick walls disappeared into fog. Gas lamps burned at long intervals along the pier, their reflections trembling upon the oily water.

Inspector Thomas Avery walked beside Elizabeth Mercer without speaking.

Sergeant Malloy followed several yards behind them.

Avery had ordered the rest of the policemen to remain at the Silver Swan.

He did not trust the situation enough to bring a larger party.

He trusted it even less because the dead man's message had contained Elizabeth's surname.

"How long has your father been dead?" Avery asked.

Elizabeth kept walking.

"He isn't dead."

Avery looked at her.

"You said he disappeared."

"Yes."

"Seven years ago."

"Yes."

"You never found a body."

"No."

"Then why did you assume he was dead?"

"Because my mother did."

"And you?"

Elizabeth stopped.

The river moved beside them.

"I was nineteen," she said. "My father left one evening and told me he would return before midnight. He never came home."

Avery waited.

"The police searched the waterfront. They found his coat near Pier Six."

"Blood?"

"No."

"His hat?"

"No."

"Anything else?"

"A pocket watch."

"Was it broken?"

"No."

"Still running?"

"Yes."

Avery frowned.

"Then why did you believe he had been murdered?"

"Because my father had never left his watch behind in his life."

They continued toward the pier.

At its entrance stood a wooden sign:

PIER 6 — MERCER & COMPANY

Avery stopped.

He looked at Elizabeth.

"You never mentioned your father's company."

"My father didn't own it."

The name had been painted over.

Avery stepped closer.

Beneath the newer lettering, another name was visible.

MERCER SHIPPING & MEDICAL SUPPLIES

"Your father owned a shipping company?"

"Briefly."

"Briefly?"

"Until he discovered what it was being used for."

Avery's expression hardened.

"What?"

Elizabeth looked toward the dark warehouses.

"People."

Avery said nothing.

She continued.

"Patients from charity hospitals. Homeless men. Sailors. Immigrants. People nobody would miss."

"What were they doing with them?"

"I don't know."

"You said your father was investigating."

"He believed someone was conducting medical experiments."

Avery looked at her.

"Medical experiments?"

"That was his theory."

"On whom?"

"People who could disappear without anyone asking questions."

Avery stared at the warehouse.

"Dear God."

A sound came from inside.

A metallic clang.

Avery drew his revolver.

"Stay behind me."

Elizabeth shook her head.

"No."

"Doctor—"

"If my father is in there, I'm coming."

Avery wanted to argue.

Instead he nodded.

They entered the warehouse.

The smell struck Avery first.

Chemicals.

Alcohol.

Disinfectant.

And beneath them, the unmistakable smell of old blood.

Malloy shut the door behind them.

Avery raised his lantern.

The warehouse was enormous.

Crates were stacked almost to the ceiling.

Most were marked as medical supplies.

Some bore European shipping labels.

Others were stamped with the names of hospitals.

Avery approached one.

"Charity Hospital."

Elizabeth opened another.

Inside were glass bottles.

Morphine.

Chloroform.

Surgical instruments.

Avery examined the packing slip.

"These were delivered three years ago."

"By whom?"

He read the name.

"Mercer & Company."

Elizabeth stared at him.

"My father had been missing for four years by then."

Avery looked toward the dark interior of the warehouse.

"Then either somebody was using his name..."

"Or he wasn't missing."

Avery turned.

A door slammed somewhere ahead.

They ran.

The corridor opened into a large room.

Rows of tables stood beneath hanging lamps.

Most were empty.

One was not.

A man sat beside it.

His back was toward them.

He was elderly, perhaps sixty-five, with silver hair and a dark physician's coat.

Elizabeth stopped breathing.

"Father?"

The man turned.

Avery raised his revolver.

Elizabeth stepped forward.

The old man stared at his daughter.

For several seconds, neither moved.

Then he smiled.

"Elizabeth."

She ran toward him.

Avery lowered his weapon.

But something about the scene troubled him.

The man looked exactly as Elizabeth had described him.

The same narrow face.

The same deep-set eyes.

The same scar above the right eyebrow.

Yet he looked older.

Much older.

Elizabeth embraced him.

"My God," she whispered. "You're alive."

Her father placed a hand on her shoulder.

"I've been waiting for you."

She pulled away.

"Waiting?"

"For seven years."

"Why didn't you come home?"

His expression changed.

"Because I couldn't."

"Couldn't?"

"They would have killed you."

Elizabeth stared at him.

"Who?"

He looked toward Avery.

"Your friend."

Avery frowned.

"I'm not her friend."

"Not yet."

Dr. Jonathan Mercer stood.

He was trembling.

"Inspector Avery, you have no idea what you've walked into."

Avery kept his revolver ready.

"Tell me."

Mercer glanced toward the door.

"They're watching us."

"Who?"

"The men behind the ledger."

Avery's pulse quickened.

"What is the ledger?"

Mercer gave a bitter smile.

"You found it."

"Someone took it."

"Of course they did."

"Who?"

Mercer looked at Elizabeth.

Then at Avery.

"The people who have controlled this city for longer than you realize."

Avery stepped closer.

"Politicians?"

"No."

"Police?"

"Some."

"Businessmen?"

"Many."

"Doctors?"

Mercer nodded.

"Doctors."

Elizabeth stared at her father.

"What did they do?"

Mercer hesitated.

Then he walked to a cabinet.

He opened it.

Inside were dozens of photographs.

Avery took one.

It showed a group of men standing outside the Silver Swan.

Patrick Dwyer was among them.

Avery looked at another.

The same men stood beside a hospital.

Another photograph showed them beside a police station.

Another showed them on the steps of City Hall.

Avery's face hardened.

"How many?"

"Thirty-seven," Mercer said.

"Thirty-seven what?"

"Members."

"Of what?"

Mercer looked directly at him.

"The Society of the Black Ledger."

The name seemed absurd until Avery remembered the book.

Then he noticed something else.

A date written on the back of one photograph.

November 23, 1893.

Tonight.

Avery turned it over.

The photograph showed the men gathered around a table.

At the center of the table was the black ledger.

Elizabeth looked over his shoulder.

"When was this taken?"

"Tonight," Mercer said.

Avery looked at him.

"Impossible."

Mercer shook his head.

"No."

He pointed toward the photograph.

"Look at the man standing beside the ledger."

Avery did.

His blood went cold.

The man was wearing the same black coat and hat as the stranger who had attacked them in the cellar.

The scar was visible.

But it was not the face that frightened Avery.

It was the date.

The photograph had been taken only an hour earlier.

And standing beside the scarred man was Patrick Dwyer.

Avery turned toward the door.

"Where is Dwyer?"

Mercer answered quietly.

"Exactly where he wants you to think he isn't."

Then the warehouse lights went out.

A gunshot exploded in the darkness.

Jonathan Mercer collapsed.

Elizabeth screamed.

Avery fired toward the muzzle flash.

Glass shattered.

Someone ran.

Avery grabbed Elizabeth and pulled her behind a crate.

"Stay down!"

"Father!"

"Don't move!"

Another shot rang out.

Then silence.

Avery waited.

Slowly, he raised the lantern.

Mercer was on the floor.

Elizabeth crawled toward him.

There was blood on his shirt.

But the old doctor was still breathing.

He opened his eyes.

"Inspector..."

Avery knelt beside him.

"Who shot you?"

Mercer gripped his hand.

"Not... a man."

Avery frowned.

"What?"

Mercer struggled to breathe.

"The ledger..."

His eyes moved toward the darkness.

"It doesn't record the dead."

Avery leaned closer.

"What does it record?"

Mercer's grip tightened.

"The living."

Then he lost consciousness.

Avery looked at Elizabeth.

Neither of them spoke.

From somewhere deep inside the warehouse came the sound of footsteps.

Slow.

Measured.

Approaching.

Avery raised his revolver.

The footsteps stopped.

A voice came from the darkness.

The same voice they had heard in the cellar.

"You should have stayed away from the Bowery, Inspector."

Avery fired.

The voice laughed.

And somewhere behind them, a door opened onto the river.

By the time Avery reached it, the killer was gone.

Only one thing remained on the floor.

A black leather ledger.

Avery picked it up.

This time, when he opened it, the pages were blank.

Except for one new entry.

Written in fresh red ink:

THOMAS AVERY — DECEASED — 3:17 A.M.

Avery looked at the warehouse clock.

It was 2:41.

He slowly closed the book.

For the first time in his career, Inspector Thomas Avery was afraid of the future.

Chapter Five

The Hour of the Dead

At 2:43 in the morning, Inspector Thomas Avery decided that a book could be more frightening than a loaded revolver.

He stood beneath the warehouse clock, staring at the words written in red ink.

THOMAS AVERY — DECEASED — 3:17 A.M.

The clock continued ticking.

2:44.

Elizabeth Mercer was kneeling beside her father.

Jonathan Mercer had regained consciousness, but only barely. The bullet had entered high in his shoulder and passed through the flesh without striking bone. It was painful, bloody, and alarming, but not immediately fatal.

Elizabeth tore a strip from her petticoat and pressed it against the wound.

"Father?"

Mercer opened his eyes.

"Elizabeth."

"I'm here."

"Good."

His gaze moved to Avery.

"The ledger."

Avery held it up.

"It says I'm dead."

Mercer gave a tired smile.

"Then you have seventeen minutes."

Avery glanced at the clock.

"I've had better evenings."

Elizabeth looked up.

"What does it mean?"

Mercer shook his head.

"It means they have decided you will die."

"Who?"

"The Society."

Avery closed the ledger.

"Then perhaps they should have consulted me first."

Mercer reached for his wrist.

"You don't understand."

"Then explain."

"They don't predict death."

"That's what you said before."

"They arrange it."

Avery stared at him.

Mercer continued.

"The ledger contains the names of everyone the Society intends to eliminate. Some are criminals. Some are witnesses. Some are simply inconvenient."

"And the people who kill them?"

"Often policemen."

Avery's expression hardened.

"You're telling me the police are involved."

"I'm telling you that men wearing police uniforms are involved."

Avery thought of Officer Walsh.

The black envelope.

The bartender.

The cellar.

Then something occurred to him.

"Where is Sergeant Malloy?"

Elizabeth looked around.

He was gone.

Avery's hand went instinctively toward his revolver.

"How long?"

"I don't know," Elizabeth said.

Mercer closed his eyes.

"He has been gone since the shooting."

Avery's suspicion became certainty.

"Then we're leaving."

Elizabeth looked at her father.

"We can't move him."

"We have to."

"Why?"

"Because this building is no longer safe."

Avery lifted Mercer carefully.

The older man's face tightened with pain.

"Inspector."

"What?"

"Don't take the main entrance."

Avery stopped.

"Why?"

"They'll be waiting there."

"How do you know?"

Mercer looked toward the floor.

"Because that's where I would wait."

They carried him through the warehouse.

At the far end, Mercer pointed toward a narrow iron staircase.

"Down."

Avery hesitated.

"Where does it lead?"

"The river."

"Excellent."

The stairs descended into darkness.

They reached a brick passage beneath the warehouse.

Water dripped from the ceiling.

Avery held the lantern before him.

"How far?"

"Two hundred yards."

"To where?"

"A forgotten gate."

Mercer coughed.

"From there, we reach Water Street."

Elizabeth looked at Avery.

"Then what?"

"Then we find a doctor."

Mercer laughed weakly.

"I am a doctor."

"You're also the patient."

They continued.

Halfway through the tunnel, Avery stopped.

A sound echoed behind them.

Footsteps.

Elizabeth froze.

"Are they following us?"

Avery extinguished the lantern.

Darkness swallowed them.

The footsteps came closer.

One.

Two.

Three.

Then stopped.

Avery could hear his own breathing.

Jonathan Mercer whispered something.

Avery leaned toward him.

"What?"

"Don't breathe."

It was absurd advice.

Avery held his breath anyway.

A figure entered the tunnel.

A faint glow appeared.

A lantern.

The man carried a pistol.

Avery recognized the silhouette.

Sergeant Malloy.

Avery felt a sudden mixture of anger and relief.

Malloy walked toward them.

"Inspector?"

Avery stepped forward.

"Where have you been?"

Malloy raised his lantern.

"I was looking for you."

"With a pistol?"

Malloy looked at the weapon.

"There's been another shooting."

"Who?"

"You."

Avery stared at him.

Malloy's face was grim.

"Someone has been telling people you're dead."

Avery held up the ledger.

"They're ahead of schedule."

Malloy saw the writing.

His expression changed.

"Dear God."

"Yes."

Malloy lowered his weapon.

"I can get you out."

Avery studied him.

"Why should I trust you?"

"Because I have been with you for fifteen years."

Avery nodded.

"That is precisely why."

Malloy looked wounded.

"You think I'm involved?"

"I don't know."

"Then what do you know?"

Avery looked at the clock on his pocket watch.

2:58.

"That I have nineteen minutes to prove a book wrong."

Malloy stared at him.

Then he smiled.

It was the wrong smile.

Avery saw it immediately.

He raised his revolver.

"Drop the gun."

Malloy froze.

Elizabeth stared between them.

"Inspector?"

"He's not Malloy."

The man laughed.

His voice changed.

It was the voice from the cellar.

The scarred man.

"You are becoming tiresome, Inspector."

He fired.

Avery threw himself aside.

The bullet struck the brick wall.

Elizabeth pulled her father behind a support pillar.

The stranger advanced.

Avery fired twice.

The first shot struck the man's shoulder.

The second missed.

The stranger staggered but remained standing.

"Who are you?" Avery shouted.

The man smiled.

"Ask your friend."

Avery looked at Jonathan Mercer.

The old doctor had gone white.

"You know him."

Mercer nodded.

"Yes."

"Who?"

Mercer stared at the scarred man.

"His name is Elias Vale."

The stranger smiled.

"Was."

Avery frowned.

"What does that mean?"

Vale touched the scar along his face.

"I died seven years ago."

Elizabeth whispered, "No."

Vale looked at her.

"Your father saw it happen."

Mercer shut his eyes.

"You were supposed to be dead."

"I was."

"Then what are you?"

Vale smiled.

"The reason the ledger works."

He turned and ran.

Avery chased him.

They burst from the tunnel into the freezing night.

Vale disappeared among the warehouses.

Avery looked at his watch.

3:07.

Ten minutes.

He ran toward Water Street.

Then he saw the crowd.

Dozens of people stood around a police carriage.

At the center was a body.

Avery approached.

A constable stepped forward.

"Inspector, don't."

"Who is it?"

The constable looked at him with horror.

"We found him five minutes ago."

Avery pushed through the crowd.

The dead man lay beneath a sheet.

Avery pulled it back.

He recognized the face immediately.

Sergeant Malloy.

His throat had been cut.

Avery stared.

Then he understood.

The man in the tunnel had not been Malloy.

He had been impersonating him.

Avery looked at the gathered policemen.

Someone had killed Malloy to make certain nobody could contradict the story.

A newspaper boy shouted from the edge of the crowd.

"Extra! Extra!"

Avery turned.

The boy held up a fresh edition.

The headline was enormous.

POLICE INSPECTOR MURDERED IN BOWERY HORROR!

Avery took the newspaper.

The story beneath the headline contained his name.

Thomas Avery.

It described his supposed murder.

It even described the discovery of his body.

Avery looked at his watch.

3:14.

Three minutes remained.

Elizabeth reached him.

"What is it?"

He handed her the newspaper.

She read it.

Her face went pale.

"This was printed before you died."

Avery nodded.

"Exactly."

She looked at him.

"How?"

Avery turned toward the city.

The answer came from behind them.

"Because the newspaper is part of the Society."

Jonathan Mercer had followed them from the tunnel.

He stood trembling beneath the gaslight.

"The Black Ledger is not a book," he said.

"It is a system."

Avery looked at him.

"What system?"

"A system of information."

"Names."

"Names. Dates. Movements. Police reports. Medical records. Newspapers. Shipping manifests."

Mercer pointed toward the newspaper.

"They know what will happen because they arrange what people believe has already happened."

Avery looked again at the headline.

3:15.

The ledger said he would be dead at 3:17.

Two minutes.

Then a carriage stopped at the curb.

A man stepped out.

He was dressed in a fine black suit.

Avery recognized him.

Patrick Dwyer.

The proprietor of the Silver Swan.

Dwyer looked directly at him.

Then at Elizabeth.

Then at Jonathan Mercer.

His expression was almost sorrowful.

"I'm sorry," Dwyer said.

Avery raised his revolver.

"For what?"

Dwyer looked at his watch.

3:16.

"For what happens next."

The gaslights went out.

A single gunshot broke the darkness.

And somewhere in the city, a printing press began to run.

Chapter Six

The Shot at Three Seventeen

The gunshot seemed to hang in the darkness.

For one impossible second, nobody moved.

Then Elizabeth screamed.

Avery lunged toward her, seized her arm, and pulled her behind the police carriage.

"Down!"

Another shot cracked through the darkness.

A horse reared.

Someone shouted.

A lantern fell and shattered against the pavement.

The street erupted into confusion.

Men ran in every direction. A woman cried out from an upstairs window. Somewhere nearby, a patrol whistle shrilled three times.

Avery crouched behind the carriage and listened.

"Elizabeth?"

"I'm here."

"Your father?"

"With me."

Avery looked toward Dwyer's last position.

The saloonkeeper was gone.

So was the man who had fired the shots.

Avery checked his watch.

3:17.

He looked at it again.

The hands had stopped.

The watch was broken.

For a moment he simply stared.

Then Elizabeth said quietly, "Inspector."

He looked up.

She was holding something.

A black leather book.

The ledger.

"Where did you get that?"

"It was beneath the carriage."

Avery took it from her.

The cover was wet.

Not with rain.

Blood.

He opened it.

The page that had contained his name was gone.

In its place was a fresh entry.

THOMAS AVERY — ALIVE.

Beneath it, written in a different hand, were four words:

THE LEDGER HAS FAILED.

Avery looked at Elizabeth.

"That can't be good."

"No."

"It isn't."

A voice spoke from the darkness.

"It means someone has broken the rules."

Avery raised his revolver.

Jonathan Mercer stood beneath a gas lamp.

The old physician looked exhausted, but there was something in his expression Avery had not seen before.

Fear.

Not fear for himself.

Fear for what was coming.

"You know what this means," Avery said.

Mercer nodded.

"The Society will come for all of us now."

"Why?"

"Because the ledger has never been wrong."

Avery glanced at the book.

"Apparently it has."

"No."

Mercer shook his head.

"The ledger was never wrong because nobody ever tried to contradict it."

"Until tonight."

"Until you."

Elizabeth stepped between them.

"My father, you said this was a system. Who created it?"

Mercer hesitated.

"That's the question I've spent seven years trying to answer."

"And?"

"I found the answer."

Avery looked at him.

"Who?"

Mercer stared across the street.

"The man who founded the Society died in 1868."

Avery waited.

"That doesn't answer my question."

"No."

Mercer's voice dropped.

"Because the man who founded it is also the man who is running it tonight."

Elizabeth stared at him.

"That's impossible."

"I know."

Avery felt the cold settle deeper into his bones.

"Who is he?"

Mercer looked directly at his daughter.

"Your grandfather."

Elizabeth went completely still.

"My grandfather died before I was born."

"So did mine," Mercer said.

Avery frowned.

"What does that mean?"

Mercer looked toward the dark windows of the Silver Swan.

"It means the Society has discovered something that should not be possible."

Avery's attention sharpened.

"Immortality?"

Mercer did not answer.

That was answer enough.

Before Avery could ask another question, a carriage came rapidly around the corner.

It stopped beside them.

The door opened.

A woman stepped out.

She wore a dark traveling cloak and a small black hat.

She looked at Avery.

Then at Elizabeth.

"Dr. Mercer?"

Elizabeth nodded.

The woman handed her a sealed envelope.

"This was delivered to my house twenty minutes ago."

"Who sent it?"

The woman shook her head.

"No one."

Avery took the envelope.

There was no address.

Only one name.

ELIZABETH MERCER

Elizabeth opened it.

Inside was a photograph.

Avery leaned closer.

The photograph showed a young man standing beside a woman.

Elizabeth stared at the young man.

"My father."

Mercer took the photograph from her.

His hands began to shake.

"No."

Avery examined the image.

The photograph was old.

Very old.

The clothing suggested the 1860s.

Yet the man standing beside Elizabeth's father was unmistakable.

The same narrow face.

The same pale eyes.

The same scar.

Elias Vale.

The man they had seen at the warehouse.

The man who claimed to have died seven years ago.

On the back of the photograph was a handwritten message.

Avery read it aloud.

Jonathan,

You told me once that death was a boundary no man could cross.

You were wrong.

Come to the old hospital before sunrise.

Bring your daughter.

Come alone.

—E.V.

Elizabeth looked at her father.

"You knew him."

Mercer closed his eyes.

"Yes."

"How?"

"I helped him."

"Do what?"

Mercer looked at her.

"Come back."

The words seemed to silence the entire street.

Avery folded the photograph.

"Then we're going to the hospital."

Mercer shook his head.

"No."

"You said the Society would come for us."

"They will."

"Then we need answers."

"No, Inspector."

Mercer's expression became desperate.

"You need to understand what you're walking toward."

Avery stepped closer.

"I've spent fifteen years chasing murderers. I've seen men kill for money, revenge, politics, and madness."

He looked at the photograph.

"But I've never seen a dead man walk."

Mercer said nothing.

Avery continued.

"So until someone gives me a better explanation, I'm going to assume that whatever is happening can still be understood."

Elizabeth looked at him.

"And if it can't?"

Avery smiled grimly.

"Then we'll have to become very good at being confused."

For the first time that night, she laughed.

It lasted only a moment.

Then a church bell began ringing in the distance.

Four o'clock.

Avery looked toward the eastern horizon.

The sky was beginning to pale.

Dawn was coming.

And somewhere in the darkness ahead, a man who had supposedly been dead for seven years was waiting for them.

Avery climbed into the carriage.

Elizabeth followed.

Jonathan Mercer hesitated before entering.

Then he looked back at the Silver Swan.

The saloon stood dark and silent.

Except for one window.

A figure stood behind it.

Watching.

Mercer recognized him.

His face went white.

"Inspector."

Avery looked back.

"What?"

Mercer pointed toward the window.

"The man who founded the Society."

Avery saw the figure.

An elderly man.

White hair.

Black coat.

Pale face.

And even at that distance, Avery could see the eyes.

The same pale eyes as Elias Vale.

The figure raised one hand.

Then drew a finger slowly across his throat.

The carriage began to move.

Avery watched the window until the Silver Swan disappeared behind them.

He opened the ledger again.

The pages were no longer blank.

A new list had appeared.

Three names.

ELIZABETH MERCER

JONATHAN MERCER

THOMAS AVERY

Beside each name was the same time.

SUNRISE.

Avery closed the book.

The investigation had begun as a murder in a Bowery cellar.

Now it had become something else.

Something much older.

Something that had been waiting for them long before any of them were born.

And as the first gray light appeared over New York Harbor, Avery realized the most frightening possibility of all.

Perhaps the Society had never been hunting them.

Perhaps it had been preparing for them.

Chapter Seven

The Old Hospital

The old hospital stood at the northern edge of the Bowery, where the streets began to narrow and the buildings leaned toward one another as though conspiring to keep out the morning.

It had been closed for nearly five years.

Once, St. Bartholomew's had treated hundreds of the city's poor. Then came rumors of missing patients, unexplained deaths, and physicians who resigned without explanation. The hospital trustees had denied everything.

Eventually the doors were locked.

The city had forgotten the place.

Men like Jonathan Mercer had not.

The carriage stopped before the iron gates at twenty minutes before sunrise.

Avery climbed down first.

He studied the building.

Three stories of dark brick.

Tall windows.

A broken cupola.

The hospital chapel stood behind it, its bell tower rising above the roof like a finger pointed toward heaven.

Elizabeth stepped down beside him.

"Is this where you worked?" she asked her father.

Mercer nodded.

"For eleven years."

"And this is where you met Elias Vale?"

"Yes."

"What was he?"

Mercer hesitated.

"A patient."

Avery turned.

"A patient?"

"He was brought here in 1884."

"Alive?"

"Very much so."

"What was wrong with him?"

"Nothing."

Avery stared.

Mercer continued.

"He had been stabbed through the chest."

Elizabeth looked at him.

"And survived?"

"No."

Mercer lowered his voice.

"He died."

The wind moved through the iron gates.

"Then what happened?"

"He came back."

Avery frowned.

"How long was he dead?"

"Forty-three minutes."

Elizabeth stared at her father.

"You're serious."

"I wish I weren't."

Avery looked toward the hospital.

"Did you see it?"

"I was there."

"And you brought him back?"

Mercer shook his head.

"I didn't."

"Then who did?"

Mercer looked at the hospital doors.

"Dr. August Bell."

The name meant nothing to Avery.

Mercer continued.

"He was one of the founders of the Society."

"One of the men in the photographs?"

"Yes."

"Is he still alive?"

Mercer did not answer.

Avery understood.

"Of course he is."

They entered the hospital.

The doors opened with surprising ease.

Inside, the air smelled of dust and old medicine.

Rows of iron beds remained in the wards.

The sheets had been removed years ago.

Some beds were overturned.

Others stood perfectly made.

Elizabeth walked slowly beside her father.

"I remember this."

Mercer looked at her.

"You were here?"

"Once."

"You were never supposed to come."

"I was twelve."

He smiled sadly.

"You always were difficult."

They reached the central hall.

Avery noticed something carved into the wall.

A circle surrounded by seven lines.

"What is that?"

Mercer looked at it.

"The Society's symbol."

"Seven lines?"

"Seven founders."

Avery examined it.

"How many are alive?"

"All seven."

"That can't be."

"It is."

Avery turned toward him.

"Who are they?"

Mercer listed them.

"August Bell. Isaac Rosen. Patrick Dwyer. Nathaniel Cross. Edmund Vale. Samuel Harrow. And your grandfather."

Elizabeth stared at him.

"My grandfather's name was Elias Mercer."

"No."

Mercer looked at his daughter.

"Your grandfather's name was Nathaniel Mercer."

Elizabeth's face went pale.

"My grandfather died in 1872."

"He was reported dead."

"By whom?"

"The Society."

Avery suddenly understood.

"The Black Ledger."

Mercer nodded.

"Deaths are recorded. Identities are altered. Property changes hands. Newspapers publish the appropriate story."

"And the dead man?"

"May become somebody else."

Avery looked toward the dark corridor.

"Elias Vale."

Mercer nodded.

"He wasn't born Elias Vale."

"Who was he?"

"Your grandfather's son."

Elizabeth stared.

"My uncle?"

"Yes."

"Then why did he attack us?"

Mercer looked away.

"Because he believes I betrayed him."

"Did you?"

"I tried to destroy the Society."

Avery stepped closer.

"And failed."

"I was one of them."

Elizabeth recoiled.

"What?"

Mercer looked at his daughter.

"I helped create the ledger."

The words hung in the corridor.

Avery said nothing.

Elizabeth's voice was barely audible.

"How many people died?"

"I don't know."

"How many?"

Mercer closed his eyes.

"Too many."

Avery's expression hardened.

"And you expect me to believe you're innocent?"

"No."

Mercer looked directly at him.

"I expect you to understand that I became a criminal because I discovered what the Society intended to do."

"What?"

Mercer pointed toward the chapel.

"Come."

They crossed the hall.

The chapel doors were locked.

Mercer removed a key from inside his coat.

Avery stared at him.

"You still had that?"

"I've had it for thirty years."

The lock turned.

The chapel was small and dark.

At the altar stood a stone cross.

Behind it was a narrow wooden cabinet.

Mercer opened it.

Inside were papers.

Maps.

Photographs.

Medical charts.

And one thick manuscript.

Avery lifted it.

The title was handwritten:

THE CONTINUANCE PROJECT

Elizabeth stood beside him.

"What is it?"

Mercer looked at the manuscript.

"The Society's true purpose."

Avery opened it.

The first pages contained medical notes.

Blood transfusions.

Organ regeneration.

Electrical stimulation.

Experimental drugs.

Then he reached a page containing a sentence written in large letters:

DEATH IS A FAILURE OF INFORMATION.

Avery frowned.

"What does that mean?"

Mercer took the manuscript.

"They believe the human body doesn't truly die."

Elizabeth shook her head.

"That's madness."

"Perhaps."

Mercer opened another page.

"They believe consciousness can be preserved in the nervous system."

Avery read the diagrams.

"Memory."

"Yes."

"Stored physically?"

"That's their theory."

"And they can transfer it?"

"Not completely."

"Yet."

Mercer looked toward the chapel doors.

"That is what they have spent thirty years trying to accomplish."

Avery suddenly remembered Elias Vale.

A man dead for forty-three minutes.

A man who returned.

He looked at Mercer.

"Vale wasn't resurrected."

"No."

"What happened?"

Mercer whispered:

"They replaced him."

Avery's face hardened.

"With whom?"

Mercer didn't answer.

A bell rang.

Once.

The sound came from the hospital tower.

Elizabeth looked toward the window.

"The sun."

A thin line of gold had appeared over the rooftops.

Mercer looked at the clock.

6:02.

He suddenly seemed terrified.

"No."

Avery turned.

"What?"

"The ledger said sunrise."

"Yes."

"That wasn't a threat."

Mercer looked toward the doors.

"It was an appointment."

The chapel doors opened.

Seven men stood in the hallway.

Patrick Dwyer was among them.

Beside him stood Isaac Rosen.

Avery recognized several faces from the photographs.

And at the center stood an elderly man with white hair and pale eyes.

He looked remarkably healthy for someone who had supposedly died decades earlier.

Elizabeth whispered:

"Who is that?"

Jonathan Mercer answered.

"Your grandfather."

The old man smiled.

"My dear Elizabeth."

Avery raised his revolver.

The old man looked at him.

"Inspector Avery."

"Stay where you are."

The old man laughed softly.

"You still think a pistol gives you authority."

Avery's finger tightened around the trigger.

The man continued.

"You have spent the entire night trying to solve a murder."

He stepped into the chapel.

"But the murder was never the mystery."

Avery stared at him.

"Then what was?"

The old man's pale eyes settled upon Elizabeth.

"The mystery is why you were allowed to survive."

Elizabeth went still.

Her grandfather smiled.

"Because, my dear, you are the final experiment."

Chapter Eight

The Final Experiment

Elizabeth Mercer did not move.

For several seconds, she could hear nothing except the ticking of the small clock on the chapel wall.

Then she laughed.

It was not a frightened laugh.

It was the laugh of someone who had been told something so impossible that the mind had temporarily refused to accept it.

"My grandfather," she said, "has been dead for twenty-one years."

The old man smiled.

"That is what they told you."

"My mother attended his funeral."

"Yes."

"My father identified the body."

"Yes."

"And you expect me to believe that you're him?"

"I don't expect you to believe anything."

He stepped closer.

"I expect you to remember."

Elizabeth frowned.

"Remember what?"

"Your childhood."

She shook her head.

"I remember it perfectly."

"Do you?"

He raised one finger.

"You were six years old when you fell from the apple tree behind your father's house."

Elizabeth's face changed.

"You broke your left arm."

She looked at her father.

He was staring at the floor.

"You cried for three hours," the old man continued. "Your father carried you inside. Your mother wanted to take you to the hospital."

Elizabeth whispered, "How do you know that?"

"I was there."

"My grandfather wasn't."

The old man's expression softened.

"I was."

Avery raised his revolver higher.

"Enough."

The old man looked at him.

"Inspector, do you know what memory is?"

"I know what murder is."

"Memory is the more interesting subject."

He gestured toward the manuscript.

"Your scientists have begun to understand that the brain is an electrical machine. But they still misunderstand the nature of information."

Avery glanced at Mercer.

"What is he talking about?"

Mercer answered quietly.

"The Continuance Project."

The old man nodded.

"Your father was one of the most brilliant physicians I ever knew."

Elizabeth looked at him.

"You said he helped create this."

"He did."

"And you?"

"I financed it."

"Why?"

The old man smiled.

"Because I refused to die."

Avery's expression hardened.

"That's why you killed people?"

"We did not kill them."

"Then what happened to them?"

"They were unsuccessful."

"That's a convenient word."

"It is an accurate one."

The old man walked toward a cabinet.

He removed a small glass cylinder.

Inside was a dark, translucent substance suspended in liquid.

Elizabeth stared.

"What is that?"

"The beginning."

"The beginning of what?"

"Memory without a body."

Mercer stepped forward.

"Don't."

The old man's expression changed.

"You still cling to morality."

"I learned something from my failures."

"No."

"You learned fear."

The old man placed the cylinder on the table.

"Fear is useful."

Avery looked around the chapel.

"What does Elizabeth have to do with this?"

The old man regarded her.

"Everything."

Elizabeth's father suddenly moved.

He seized a brass candlestick from the altar.

The old man turned.

Mercer struck him across the face.

The chapel erupted into chaos.

Avery fired a shot into the ceiling.

"Nobody move!"

The seven men in the hallway stopped.

Mercer grabbed Elizabeth.

"Run!"

They sprinted through a side door.

Avery followed.

They entered a narrow corridor behind the chapel.

"Where are we going?" Elizabeth asked.

"Out."

Mercer shook his head.

"Not that way."

"Why?"

"They'll be waiting."

Avery looked at him.

"Then where?"

Mercer stopped before a brick wall.

He pressed three bricks in sequence.

A hidden door opened.

Avery stared.

"Your hospital has too many secrets."

Mercer hurried inside.

The passage beyond descended beneath the building.

They followed.

After several minutes they reached a subterranean chamber.

Elizabeth stopped.

Rows of glass containers filled the room.

Inside them were anatomical specimens.

Brains.

Organs.

Sections of nervous tissue.

And in the center stood a massive machine of brass, glass, copper wire, and porcelain insulators.

Avery approached it.

"What is this?"

Mercer looked at the machine.

"The Continuance Engine."

"What does it do?"

"It records electrical activity in the brain."

Elizabeth stared at the apparatus.

"That's impossible."

"Not entirely."

Mercer pointed toward a bank of glass plates.

"Those are photographic recording surfaces."

Avery looked at him.

"You've been experimenting on people down here."

Mercer nodded.

"I was."

"How many?"

"I don't know."

Elizabeth turned away.

Her father looked ashamed.

"I thought I could help them."

"Help them?"

"Preserve memory."

"Whose memory?"

Mercer hesitated.

"Anyone's."

Avery understood.

"The dead men."

Mercer nodded.

"The Society believed that if consciousness could be recorded at the moment of death, it could eventually be transferred."

Elizabeth looked at the machine.

"And it worked?"

Mercer shook his head.

"Not as they intended."

"What happened?"

"The memories remained."

"Where?"

Mercer pointed toward the glass cylinders.

"In the apparatus."

Elizabeth stared.

"Memories without people."

"Yes."

Avery looked at the cylinders.

"Then what is Vale?"

Mercer hesitated.

"A reconstruction."

"Of what?"

"Several people."

Elizabeth went pale.

"Several?"

Mercer nodded.

"The Society discovered they could combine memories."

Avery's stomach tightened.

"So Vale isn't one man."

"No."

"Then who is he?"

Mercer looked toward the stairs.

"Everyone."

Avery heard footsteps above.

He drew his revolver.

"We have company."

The footsteps descended.

Slowly.

Then the old man's voice echoed through the chamber.

"You see now."

He appeared at the top of the stairs.

The Society stood behind him.

"You understand why Elizabeth is important."

Elizabeth backed away.

"Why me?"

Her grandfather smiled.

"Because you were born with something we could never manufacture."

"What?"

"Resistance."

She stared.

"The experiments altered your father."

He pointed toward Mercer.

"They altered me."

His eyes moved toward the machinery.

"But they could never make the process stable."

"And I can?"

"You can survive it."

Elizabeth shook her head.

"No."

"Your nervous system is unusually resistant to electrical trauma. Your childhood injuries should have produced permanent damage."

"They didn't."

"Exactly."

Avery looked at Mercer.

"Is this true?"

Mercer nodded.

"I discovered it when she was twelve."

Elizabeth stared at her father.

"You knew?"

"I knew something was different."

"You never told me."

"I was trying to protect you."

The old man laughed.

"Protect her?"

His voice became cold.

"You brought her into this world."

Mercer turned toward him.

"And I will take her out of it."

He reached beneath his coat.

Avery saw the pistol.

"Don't!"

Mercer fired.

The old man fell backward.

The Society members scattered.

Avery grabbed Elizabeth.

"Run!"

They raced toward the opposite door.

Behind them came shouting.

Then gunfire.

They reached the stairwell.

Elizabeth stopped.

"My father!"

Avery turned.

Mercer was still in the chamber.

He was surrounded.

The old man had risen.

There was blood on his cheek.

He looked directly at Avery.

Then at Elizabeth.

"Go," Mercer shouted.

Elizabeth tried to return.

Avery seized her.

"Your father told you to go."

She fought him.

"Let me go!"

"No!"

The chamber door slammed shut.

Avery dragged her up the stairs.

They reached the ground floor.

For several seconds they stood in silence.

Then an explosion shook the hospital.

Dust fell from the ceiling.

Elizabeth looked back.

"Father."

Avery grabbed her hand.

"We have to keep moving."

"He's still down there."

"I know."

Another explosion.

The floor beneath them trembled.

Avery looked toward the entrance.

Sunlight was beginning to stream through the windows.

They ran.

Behind them, beneath the abandoned hospital, the Continuance Engine came alive.

Glass tubes began to glow.

Copper coils crackled.

And somewhere in the darkness, Jonathan Mercer's voice whispered through the machine:

"Elizabeth."

She stopped.

Avery looked at her.

"What?"

She stared toward the basement.

"I heard him."

Then the voice came again.

Not from below.

From everywhere.

"Elizabeth."

She covered her ears.

Avery drew his revolver.

The hospital seemed to breathe around them.

And from the walls, the ceilings, and the old pipes came dozens of voices speaking together.

Some belonged to men.

Some belonged to women.

Some were young.

Some were ancient.

All were saying the same thing.

"Elizabeth Mercer."

Avery looked at the pale morning light outside.

Then at the darkness behind them.

The mystery was no longer about who had murdered the man in the cellar.

It was about how many dead men were still alive.

And whether Elizabeth Mercer was the key to bringing them back.

Chapter Nine

Voices in the Walls

The voices stopped the instant the sun crossed the windows.

Silence returned so abruptly that Elizabeth could hear the ticking of Avery's pocket watch.

For several seconds neither of them moved.

Then Avery said, "We leave."

Elizabeth shook her head.

"My father is down there."

"Elizabeth—"

"He may be alive."

"He may be."

"Then I'm not leaving him."

Avery looked toward the basement.

The old hospital trembled beneath their feet.

A thin cloud of dust drifted from the ceiling.

"We can't go down there," he said.

"Why?"

"Because whatever is happening below us has already survived an explosion."

Elizabeth stared at him.

"Then we find another way."

Avery sighed.

"You're very much like your father."

"Is that supposed to be a compliment?"

"No."

She almost smiled.

Then a deep metallic groan came from beneath the floor.

The hospital shook again.

Avery grabbed her arm.

"Now we leave."

They ran for the entrance.

The doors burst open.

Morning had arrived over New York.

The Bowery was waking.

Horse-drawn wagons rattled through the streets. Shopkeepers raised shutters. Newsboys gathered at street corners. Smoke rose from chimneys beneath a pale November sky.

For a moment the ordinary world seemed impossibly reassuring.

Then Elizabeth stopped.

Across the street stood a newsboy holding a stack of newspapers.

He was shouting the headline.

"Extra! Extraordinary murder! Police inspector found dead!"

Avery stared.

The boy's voice carried clearly.

"Inspector Thomas Avery murdered in Bowery conspiracy!"

Avery crossed the street.

The boy looked at him.

"Morning, sir."

"Give me one."

The boy handed him a newspaper.

Avery unfolded it.

The headline occupied nearly half the front page.

INSPECTOR AVERY FOUND DEAD

Beneath it was a detailed account of his supposed death.

It described the location.

The hour.

The gunshot.

Even the discovery of his body.

Avery looked at Elizabeth.

"How?"

She read over his shoulder.

"This says your body was found at three seventeen."

Avery nodded.

"And at three seventeen, I was standing beside you."

The newspaper boy watched them.

"Sir?"

Avery looked at him.

"Who gave you these papers?"

The boy pointed down the street.

"Man from the printing office."

"What man?"

"Didn't see his face."

"Did he say anything?"

The boy shrugged.

"Just told us to sell them quickly."

Avery folded the newspaper.

"Of course."

Elizabeth looked toward the hospital.

"We need to find my father."

Avery nodded.

But before they could move, a carriage stopped beside them.

A woman stepped out.

She was dressed in black.

She was perhaps forty years old, with a pale face and tired eyes.

She looked directly at Avery.

"Inspector."

He reached for his revolver.

"Who are you?"

"My name is Clara Harrow."

Avery froze.

One of the Society's seven founders.

"You're Nathaniel Harrow's daughter?"

"No."

She looked toward the hospital.

"I'm his wife."

Avery studied her.

"Your husband is dead."

"Yes."

"When?"

"Yesterday."

Elizabeth frowned.

"Then how do you know about the Society?"

Clara looked at her.

"Because my husband was murdered for trying to leave it."

She held out a small envelope.

"This belonged to him."

Avery took it.

There was a symbol on the front.

The same seven lines.

"What is this?"

"The last thing my husband wrote."

Avery opened it.

Inside was a single sheet.

The handwriting was hurried.

If Avery survives, take him to the Bell Tower.

Do not trust Mercer.

Do not trust the police.

Do not trust the newspapers.

Most of all, do not trust Elizabeth.

Avery looked up.

Elizabeth had seen the words.

Her face had gone pale.

"What does it mean?"

Clara looked at her sadly.

"It means they were afraid of you."

Elizabeth shook her head.

"Why?"

"Because your grandfather told them you were the final experiment."

Avery folded the letter.

"Mrs. Harrow, what happened to your husband?"

"He was found dead in his study."

"Cause?"

"Heart failure."

Avery stared at her.

"And you believe he was murdered."

"I know he was."

"How?"

Clara looked toward the hospital.

"Because I watched him die."

Elizabeth stepped closer.

"What did you see?"

"My husband was sitting at his desk. He began screaming."

"What did he say?"

Clara's hands trembled.

"He said he could hear voices."

Elizabeth went still.

"Voices?"

"Yes."

"What kind?"

"People calling his name."

Avery exchanged a glance with Elizabeth.

Clara continued.

"He told me they were inside his head."

"What happened?"

"He collapsed."

"Did he speak afterward?"

"Once."

"What did he say?"

Clara looked directly at Elizabeth.

"He said, 'She's awake.'"

Elizabeth's face drained of color.

Avery felt a chill.

"Who?"

Clara shook her head.

"I don't know."

Avery looked toward the hospital.

Then toward the rising sun.

"We need that bell tower."

Clara nodded.

"I'll take you."

They entered the carriage.

Elizabeth sat beside Avery.

Clara took the opposite seat.

As the carriage moved north, Avery opened the letter again.

He read the final line.

It was written in smaller handwriting beneath the others.

If Elizabeth asks about her mother, tell her the truth.

Elizabeth noticed it.

"My mother?"

Avery looked at her.

"Your father never mentioned her."

"My mother died when I was fourteen."

"How?"

"Consumption."

Clara looked away.

Elizabeth saw it.

"You know something."

Clara remained silent.

"My mother didn't die of consumption, did she?"

"No."

Elizabeth's voice hardened.

"What happened?"

Clara finally answered.

"She discovered the truth."

"What truth?"

"About you."

The carriage rolled through the waking city.

Elizabeth stared at her.

"What am I?"

Clara hesitated.

Then she whispered:

"You're not the first Elizabeth Mercer."

Avery frowned.

"What?"

Clara reached into her coat.

She produced a photograph.

She handed it to Elizabeth.

It showed a young girl standing beside Jonathan Mercer.

The girl was perhaps ten years old.

She had Elizabeth's face.

Elizabeth stared.

"I don't understand."

Clara pointed toward the girl.

"That photograph was taken in 1871."

Elizabeth looked at the date.

Her hands began to shake.

"I was born in 1877."

"Yes."

Avery took the photograph.

The resemblance was unmistakable.

The same eyes.

The same mouth.

The same small scar above the eyebrow.

Elizabeth whispered:

"Who is she?"

Clara answered.

"The first Elizabeth."

Avery looked at her.

"What happened to her?"

Clara's expression became grim.

"She died."

Elizabeth closed her eyes.

"How?"

"Your father tried to save her."

"And failed."

"No."

Clara shook her head.

"He succeeded."

The carriage stopped.

Avery looked outside.

They had reached the old hospital's bell tower.

Clara opened the door.

"Come."

They stepped out.

The tower loomed above them.

Its stone walls were black with age.

Avery looked upward.

"The Society's headquarters?"

Clara shook her head.

"No."

"Then what is here?"

She looked at Elizabeth.

"The first experiment."

They entered.

A spiral staircase climbed into darkness.

Halfway up, Elizabeth heard something.

A whisper.

She stopped.

Avery turned.

"What?"

She listened.

There it was again.

A woman's voice.

Very faint.

Calling from above.

"Elizabeth."

Elizabeth looked at Avery.

"Someone's up there."

They continued climbing.

At the top they found a locked wooden door.

Clara produced a key.

The lock opened.

Inside was a small room beneath the bell.

There was a table.

A chair.

A phonograph.

And a single black ledger.

Avery approached it.

He opened the cover.

The pages were filled with names.

But this time, there were no dates.

Only birth dates.

Death dates.

And beneath each name, a third column.

CONTINUANCE.

Elizabeth looked over his shoulder.

Then she saw her own name.

ELIZABETH MERCER

Born: **October 14, 1877**

Died: **June 3, 1878**

Continuance: **Successful**

Elizabeth staggered backward.

"No."

Avery turned the page.

There were dozens of names.

Every one had a death date.

Every one had the word:

Successful.

Then Elizabeth saw another entry.

ELIZABETH MERCER

Born: **October 14, 1877**

Died: **June 3, 1878**

Continuance: **Successful**

And beneath it:

Reinstated: October 14, 1887.

Elizabeth stared.

"That's impossible."

Avery looked at her.

Clara whispered:

"Ten years after her death, they brought her back."

Elizabeth touched her face.

Her hands were trembling.

"Who am I?"

Nobody answered.

Then the phonograph began to turn.

None of them had touched it.

A crackling voice filled the room.

Jonathan Mercer's voice.

"If you are hearing this, Elizabeth, then I have failed to protect you."

Elizabeth froze.

The recording continued.

"You were not born in 1877."

A pause.

"You were born in 1868."

Elizabeth's eyes widened.

"And you died when you were ten years old."

Avery stared at the phonograph.

Jonathan's voice continued.

"But the woman you became was not the girl who died."

The bell above them began to ring.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

The voice spoke its final words.

"Elizabeth, you are the memory of my daughter."

The phonograph stopped.

Elizabeth stood motionless.

Then she whispered:

"Then whose body am I living in?"

From somewhere beneath the floor came an answer.

Her own voice.

"Mine."

The door slammed shut.

Chapter Ten

The Last Entry

The door slammed behind them.

Elizabeth turned.

The lock had disappeared beneath a sheet of iron.

Avery tried it.

Nothing.

Clara stepped backward.

"That's impossible."

Avery looked at her.

"Tonight has been rather generous with that word."

From beneath the floor came the sound of breathing.

Elizabeth stared at the boards.

"Someone is down there."

Her own voice answered from below.

"Yes."

Then came a knock.

Three times.

Elizabeth stepped toward it.

Avery caught her arm.

"Don't."

The floorboards moved.

A concealed panel opened.

A narrow staircase descended into darkness.

Clara whispered, "There was never a staircase here."

Elizabeth looked at Avery.

"Then somebody built one."

They descended.

The passage led beneath the bell tower and into a chamber of white stone.

At its center stood a single glass tank.

Inside was a young woman.

She looked exactly like Elizabeth.

Not similar.

Not merely resembling her.

Exactly.

Same hair.

Same face.

Same scar.

Same hands.

The woman opened her eyes.

Elizabeth stopped breathing.

Avery stared.

"Good Lord."

Clara covered her mouth.

The woman inside the tank smiled.

"Hello, Elizabeth."

Elizabeth stepped closer.

"Who are you?"

The woman answered:

"I am Elizabeth Mercer."

Elizabeth shook her head.

"No."

"Yes."

"That's my name."

"It was mine first."

The glass tank began to drain.

Avery raised his revolver.

"Stay where you are."

The woman laughed.

"You still think guns matter."

Avery glanced at the machinery.

"What is this?"

The woman looked at him.

"The Continuance Engine."

"You built it?"

"No."

"Then who did?"

She turned toward Elizabeth.

"Your father."

Elizabeth stared at her.

"My father is dead."

"No."

The woman smiled sadly.

"Your father is inside the machine."

The room seemed to contract around them.

Elizabeth looked toward the wires.

"How?"

"He transferred his memories before the Society killed him."

Avery stepped forward.

"You expect us to believe that?"

The woman looked at him.

"Do you believe the newspaper?"

Avery said nothing.

"Do you believe the ledger?"

"No."

"Then why believe the evidence of your own eyes?"

She stepped out of the tank.

Water ran from her hair and clothing.

She looked at Elizabeth.

"You are the second Elizabeth."

"Why?"

"Because the first one died."

Elizabeth's voice trembled.

"What happened to her?"

"She was ten years old."

"I know."

"Your father could not accept her death."

The woman walked toward her.

"He copied her memories."

Elizabeth backed away.

"Into you?"

"Into the body of another child."

Clara whispered, "Whose child?"

The woman looked at her.

"Mine."

Clara went pale.

"No."

"My mother was a patient here."

Elizabeth stared.

"You mean..."

"The body you have lived in for sixteen years belonged to another girl."

Avery looked at Elizabeth.

She was trembling.

"Then who am I?"

The woman smiled.

"You are the memory of a dead child."

Elizabeth closed her eyes.

For several seconds, nobody spoke.

Then Avery said quietly:

"Memory isn't identity."

Everyone looked at him.

He continued.

"A person isn't merely what they remember."

The woman frowned.

"That is sentimental."

"It is human."

Avery lowered his revolver.

"Elizabeth is alive because she has lived. She has made choices. She has suffered. She has loved. Whatever you put into her head sixteen years ago, she became herself."

Elizabeth looked at him.

Something changed in her expression.

The woman shook her head.

"You don't understand."

"No."

Avery smiled.

"But I understand murder."

He raised the revolver again.

"And you've murdered enough people."

The woman looked toward the machinery.

"Then stop me."

Avery fired.

The bullet struck the main copper conduit.

Sparks erupted.

The Continuance Engine screamed.

Glass shattered.

The chamber filled with light.

The voices returned.

Hundreds of them.

Men.

Women.

Children.

All speaking at once.

Elizabeth heard her father's voice.

"Run!"

She looked toward the machine.

"Father?"

"Elizabeth!"

The machinery began to collapse.

Clara grabbed her.

"Come!"

They ran.

Avery stayed behind.

He pulled a lever.

The engine exploded in a shower of sparks.

The woman screamed.

Not in pain.

In rage.

"You cannot destroy memory!"

Avery looked at her.

"No."

He stepped backward.

"But I can destroy your machine."

The ceiling began to collapse.

He ran.

They reached the staircase as the chamber disappeared behind them.

The bell tower shook.

Stone crashed through the walls.

Avery pulled Elizabeth toward the exit.

Behind them came one final sound.

A man's voice.

Jonathan Mercer.

"Elizabeth."

She stopped.

Avery looked at her.

She listened.

"Father?"

His voice came faintly from the ruined machine.

"Remember me."

Then silence.

The hospital erupted.

A section of the roof collapsed.

The bell tower cracked.

Avery, Elizabeth, and Clara stumbled into the street as dust and smoke poured from the windows.

For several minutes they stood watching the building burn.

Then Elizabeth began to cry.

Avery said nothing.

He simply stood beside her.

At last she wiped her eyes.

"Was he really there?"

"Yes."

"You heard him?"

"I did."

"Then he wasn't entirely gone."

Avery considered the question.

"No."

He looked toward the burning hospital.

"Perhaps that's what your father was trying to prove."

By sunrise, the police had arrived.

But the story they were given was simple.

An abandoned hospital had caught fire.

A group of criminals had apparently been using the basement.

Several unidentified bodies were recovered.

No mention was made of the Society.

No mention was made of the Continuance Engine.

No mention was made of the Black Ledger.

And no mention was made of Inspector Thomas Avery's supposed death.

The newspapers eventually printed a correction.

It was small.

Almost invisible.

Previous report concerning Inspector Avery was erroneous. Inspector Avery remains alive and in service.

Avery kept the clipping.

He also kept the ledger.

Three weeks later, the Silver Swan was closed.

Patrick Dwyer disappeared.

Isaac Rosen was found dead in his home.

Nathaniel Harrow's records were recovered.

Of the Society's seven founders, only one was never found.

Elias Mercer.

Elizabeth's grandfather.

The man who had claimed to be immortal.

No body was ever recovered from the hospital.

Avery never learned whether he had escaped.

Years afterward, Avery would sometimes wake in the middle of the night convinced that he could hear a bell ringing somewhere in the darkness.

Elizabeth went on to become a physician.

She never spoke publicly about the Continuance Project.

She kept one photograph from the old hospital.

It showed her father standing beside a little girl.

The girl was ten years old.

Elizabeth looked at the photograph often.

Not because she believed the girl was herself.

But because she had learned something that her grandfather had never understood.

A memory could be preserved.

A body could be repaired.

A name could be written into a ledger.

But none of those things could make a person immortal.

People lived because they changed.

Because they chose.

Because they loved and lost and remembered.

And because, eventually, they died.

The Black Ledger was destroyed in 1894.

Or so Avery believed.

He burned it himself in the fireplace of his office.

He watched every page curl into ash.

Every name disappeared.

Every date vanished.

Every prediction ended.

But one page refused to burn.

It was the final page.

Avery found it the following morning.

There was only one name.

ELIAS MERCER

Beneath it was a date.

November 23, 1893.

And beneath that, in fresh red ink:

CONTINUANCE: SUCCESSFUL

Avery stared at the words for a long time.

Then he folded the page.

He placed it inside an envelope.

And locked it in his desk.

He never told Elizabeth.

Not then.

Not ever.

Because some mysteries are solved by discovering the truth.

And some are solved by deciding that the truth is better left buried.

Outside his office, New York roared into another ordinary morning.

Carriages rolled through the streets.

Factory whistles sounded.

Newsboys shouted the latest headlines.

And somewhere in the vast city, unseen among millions of living people, a man who had died in 1872 opened his eyes.

He looked toward the Bowery.

And smiled.